



PHOTO BY KEITH GARRETT

# A RIVER THROUGH LAND & TIME:

## *Change, Continuity & the Cedar River*

Iowa has been the home to people of many cultures for more than 12,000 years. All the while, rivers have played a vital part in how each civilization lived, worked, and thrived. Our time on Project AWARE in 2017 was a true testament to how humans and rivers have co-existed through the ages. And as the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the annual multi-day, multi-night river cleanup event in Iowa, it is only fitting to highlight the Cedar River as a life source for the surrounding communities, while focusing on the one true constant; change is inevitable. What defines a civilization is how they deal with it.

Early people relied upon rivers as an essential resource for survival, especially for water, food, and navigation. Tools and technology gave way to new opportunities for the river to become an even greater asset to humans, but these new

technologies also enabled humans to harness the river's energy for other purposes.

When immigrant farmers took to the land in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the rivers were seen as challenges to be tackled, tamed, and controlled. Dams were built to reduce floods, while also generating electricity for nearby communities. For two nights, Project AWARE volunteers camped near a historic dam at Interstate Park in Mitchell County. At its peak, the economy of this tiny town rose above the riverbanks in the form of woolen and flour mills, as well as other river-driven manufacturing. Today, while the dam is now managed by the Mitchell County Conservation Board, only the footprints of its economic legacy remain as limestone blocks peaking out from the grass of the riverside campground. The







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sound of the water rolling over the dam serves as a reminder of how this area relied heavily on the river for both survival and economic abundance.

The limestone bluffs and springs that feed the Cedar River also serve as a source of ancient fossils that froze our origins in time. Back then, rivers were not present. Rather, Iowa was under an ocean of seawater. Unlike the dragonflies and crane flies which rely on rivers like the Cedar for life today, Iowa was home to coral reefs, gastropods, and brachiopods that thrived in shallow, tropical ocean waters of the day. Through educational programs during the week,

the kilns once used to fire bricks and tile out of the abundant shale deposits found there. It was these bricks that likely laid the foundation to many local buildings, some of which are still standing today.

According to the Iowa Office of the State Archaeologist, agricultural activity began within the last 3,000 years in Iowa. The plots once grown to sustain a single family or village have evolved into vast regions that fuel our global economy. In many ways, things have changed. All the while, the river remains a constant. Today, we look to the river as a source of inspiration, recreation, and in some instances, conservation in the name of restoring our soil and water.

Our time on the Cedar this year introduced more than 400 volunteers to local landowners Linda and Dean Tjaden of rural Charles City. Along with several conservation practices incorporated throughout their personal operation, a 6.2-acre wetland, constructed just recently, receives tile drainage from 695 acres of farmland. This practice alone is estimated to prevent almost 12,000 pounds of nitrogen from reaching the Cedar River.

Life on the upper Cedar River has evolved around the river since the early days of humankind. As a result, respect for the river, and the ways in which our civilization values it, has evolved to include not only technology-driven uses, but also quality of life enhancements and a greater appreciation for the recreational and human connection opportunities the river offers. Charles City is home to the first tractor ever built to manage farm land, and in 2011, it became home to the first whitewater park in Iowa. As such, Charles City has spanned

staff from Floyd County Conservation, the Iowa Geological Survey, and Upper Iowa University provided expertise as volunteers learned about what life in Iowa looked like during the Devonian period, more than 360 million years ago. The limestone and shale deposits containing these fossils also served as an economic resource for the local area, as one key feature of the Fossil & Prairie Park Preserve in Floyd County is





the full spectrum of viewing a watershed as a utility and an economic resource, and continues to value, appreciate, and manage it in such a way that benefits its citizens.

These evolutions have not come by happenstance, particularly in recent years. While events like Project AWARE bring about a more immediate change by removing trash from the river banks, other local efforts take more time. This time, however, can also bring added benefit to the river and its watershed, as demonstrated by the Upper Cedar Watershed Management Authority. While the value of the river has remained constant over time, the perception of the river and its role in local communities has evolved. All the while, the people at the center of activities have a steadfast desire to keep this vital resource healthy.

This year's event saw record attendance with 469 volunteers ranging from ages 2 to 77, and traveling from as far away as Hatfield, MA, and Rockport, TX, to participate. People from all walks of life come together on the annual event, as noted by one volunteer:

*I love the multi-generational participants from small children to senior citizens, strong men and women with tools digging out refrigerators and other large objects to young children combing the sand bars for cans and bottles. We all have our important roles and together we leave a stretch of river cleaner than it was before we came through. This is a signature Iowa event that is reaching more people every year and building AWAREness of the importance of our water resources and need for improved stewardship of our rivers by all Iowans.*

# 15TH ANNUAL PROJECT AWARE JULY 11-14, 2017 UPPER CEDAR RIVER

River Miles: 55 miles
Participants: 469
Average participants per day: 250
Trash Recycled: 24.7 tons
Total Sponsors: 90

SOLID WASTE	
Total Materials Collected	28 tons
Trash 12%	3.3 tons

<b>Recyclables 88%</b>	24.7 tons
• Misc. Recycling (Appliances, Hazardous Materials,	
• Cardboard, Plastic, Redeemable Cans/Bottles).....	2.5 tons
• Tires (368).....	7.3 tons
• Scrap Metal.....	14.9 tons

WATER QUALITY*	
Sites Monitored	16
Transparency	50 centimeters
Water Temp	75° F
pH	8
Dissolved Oxygen	8 mg/L
Nitrate-Nitrogen	5 mg/L
Nitrite-Nitrogen	0 mg/L
Chloride	less than 31 mg/L

\* Represents average values

In total, the event netted 28 tons of trash from the upper Cedar River and its watershed. This included 368 tires, 14.9 tons of metal, and 2.5 tons of other recyclables including plastic and glass. Approximately 88 percent of the material removed was recycled.

Support from the County Conservation Board staff and representatives was a testament to local efforts to manage natural resources in Iowa communities. While this event spans several days, it is the remaining part of the year where volunteers can have a true impact. Project AWARE serves as a vehicle for getting friends and families on a river and getting trash, tires, and metal out of it. But the friendships, partnerships, and camaraderie that come from the time spent together can also inspire other efforts beyond this single event. As stated by one volunteer, "we take care of what we love and I loved being on the river." As many people witnessed on the upper Cedar River during this year's event, the same sentiment holds true for the surrounding watershed community.





PHOTO BY JOHN WENCK



"This is a unique event that brings people of diverse backgrounds together. Despite our differences in background, politics, etc., volunteers embrace each other and for one week we have a community that pulls together to accomplish a task none of us could accomplish alone."

**SUSAN, 13-YEAR VOLUNTEER**

"My husband and I look forward to this event each and every year and we care deeply for our beautiful state of Iowa and her waterways. Thank you for opening my eyes to this gem of a river!"

**JODI, 3-YEAR VOLUNTEER**

"I would LOVE to go back to this area to paddle – the river was gorgeous and well cared for by the locals."

**ROSE, 8-YEAR VOLUNTEER**

"It is a life changing experience that can benefit all! I gained a consciousness of my rivers, and made some great friends!"

**JIM, 13-YEAR VOLUNTEER**

"There is no better way to learn about and experience the Iowa outdoors than participating in Project AWARE."

**DAN, 12-YEAR VOLUNTEER**

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